



"The Passion of the Christ," Jewish Pain, and Christian Responsibility

07.09.2004

A statement by a group of concerned Christians in response to the issuance of the DVD and video version of the Mel Gibson film, "The Passion of the Christ."

A STATEMENT BY CONCERNED CHRISTIANS

September, 2004

Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ," has now been released in DVD and video format for private use. This occasions deep concern among us as people whose Christian faith commitments include love and respect for the Jewish tradition and a commitment to repent of the oppression inflicted on the Jewish people by previous generations of Christians. We acknowledge Mr. Gibson's repeated statements that he does not blame the Jews for Jesus' death; we also acknowledge that many who see the film are honestly unaware of its anti-Jewish elements. We feel bound by our knowledge and our faith, however, to alert our fellow Christians to the film's misrepresentations and insinuations. We do not mean to attack Mr. Gibson personally or to call into question any viewer's faith. Our intent is to make plain some of the film's problems and to encourage Christians to work to overcome them in their own settings.

Passion plays have had a painful and violent impact on Jewish communities from medieval times into our own. Those who portrayed the Passion may never have intended direct harm to their Jewish neighbors, but such plays often did poison attitudes and incite violence against Jewish communities, sometimes with lethal consequences. Not only in the immediate response to a particular portrayal, but also in shaping a persistently negative image of Jews even among people of generally good will, Passion plays have played an influential role in long centuries of Christian anti-Judaism.

Today the legacy of Christian anti-Jewish attitudes continues to fuel antisemitism far beyond the theaters and churches in which Passion plays are performed. Antisemitism is the expression of attitudes, behavior, or propaganda that targets Jews, individually or collectively, based on hateful stereotypes and accusations. The discredited charge that Jews are "Christ-killers" continues to appear in the expression of both American and European antisemitism, which remains a serious problem. A recent Gallup poll found that 37 percent of American young adults hold the Jews responsible for Jesus' death. In the United Kingdom, synagogue desecrations tripled in the two-year period beginning October 2000, while physical assaults against Jews became more common and more violent. The scourge of antisemitism is real and present, and we must do all we can to prevent poison from the well of Christian anti-Judaism from deepening its deadly effects.

"The Passion of the Christ" is a visually powerful portrayal of Jesus' final hours that shares much with traditional Passion plays. Regrettably, this includes much of their anti-Jewish legacy along with more positive aspects. It encourages misunderstanding of the role of Jews and their leaders in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' death; it includes gratuitous anti-Jewish portrayals; and its

promotion by Christians has largely ignored the pain and concern of the Jewish community about the film. In conformity with the statements of many church bodies repudiating the "teaching of contempt" towards Jews and Judaism, we call on Christians to be aware of these anti-Jewish aspects and to take active steps to mitigate their influence.

First, we caution viewers against seeing this film as a factual representation of Jesus' Passion. Study of the film, confirmed by Mr. Gibson's own words in repeated interviews, has established that visions, legends, and fictional materials were added to a selective combination of the four gospel accounts to produce the screenplay. These visionary or fictitious unbiblical materials include the depiction of Satan and numerous demons, the portrayal of Barabbas as bestial (thereby making the Jewish crowd's preference for him even more vile), and the two-stage and frontal scourging of Jesus, a torment that would have ripped out his vital organs and killed him on the spot. This is neither historically reliable nor theologically sound.

The added materials, some dating from centuries after Jesus' own time, often reflect the anti-Jewish attitudes of the eras to which they belong. Simple agreement between these materials and one or another of the gospel narratives does not legitimize them as historical sources, since the gospels themselves are products of an historical situation that drew strong contrasts between Jesus and his Jewish kinfolk at the expense of his affinity and affection for them. The film has generated a great variety of responses from viewers, which testifies to the ambiguity of its central message. This ambiguity makes it easier for the film to be misunderstood and exploited for antisemitic purposes. Even without ill intent, the viewer fails to gain the full richness of the gospel message from this film, which therefore is inadequate as a basis for formulating an understanding of Jesus and his Passion.

Second, the film includes numerous explicitly anti-Jewish elements that we consider an affront to the gospel. Jewish figures are depicted more negatively than others; critics have demonstrated this in their analyses of the musical score, costuming, set design, and characterization. Non-biblical elements introduced into the story contribute to this negative image. Jewish guards, for example, press Judas to betray Jesus; Jewish children are transformed into demons; and divine judgment in the form of an earthquake falls more heavily on the Jewish temple than on the rest of Jerusalem.

The negative portrayal of Jewish figures is particularly evident in comparing the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas. Pilate is by turns prudent, hesitant, solicitous, doubtful, and resigned to the fate that awaits Jesus, presenting a sympathetic character. Caiaphas, however, shows no sympathy for the scourged Jesus. He is unrepentant even when a direct and unbiblical accusation of his own guilt is thrown at him on Calvary, thus embodying the age-old antisemitic stereotype of cold-blooded Jewish power conspiring to control historical events. Contrary to the church's confessions that universal human sinfulness crucified Christ, and that Jews are in no way specially responsible for his death, the artistry, direction, and tone of this film exemplify the hateful tradition of anti-Jewish Passion plays.

Third, we must dissent from the views of Christian colleagues who commend the film and its virtues while ignoring its serious defects. Acknowledging that many people have responded positively to the film, we still find it lamentable that Christian leaders so easily pass over its anti-Jewish character in favor of what they perceive to be its positive aspects. Surely, to "love the neighbor as oneself" means first to understand what causes pain and suffering for that neighbor; yet Christian endorsement of the film has ignored the deep and legitimate concerns of many in the Jewish community. Those who uncritically promote this film, looking only to its benefits for their own faith communities, turn a deaf ear to the suffering that such portrayals of the Passion have evoked, even in recent memory. This insensitivity is inexcusable.

In North America, this film has forced Christians to confront anew the issues of Christian anti-Judaism, antisemitism, and the responsibility of public figures for nurturing just and peaceful

communities. We appreciate the efforts of those who, before and during the film's theatrical release, have risen to the challenge in a timely way. Many responses to the film have demonstrated the strength of the Jewish-Christian partnership that has grown over the past half-century.

At the same time, we must express our continuing concern about the effects of this film. In private showings in years to come, the benefits of the public discussion and education we have recently seen will not be as readily available. The Christian community has a responsibility to the Gospel to do everything possible to mitigate the anti-Jewish impact of the film whenever it is shown. Simply noting that antisemitic violence has not occurred gives us minimal comfort; we have yet to address the long-term effects on the Christian imagination of images of a seething Jewish mob, of cold and calculating hooked-nosed Jewish leaders, or of scenes of cruelty inexplicably inflicted on Jesus by Jewish characters in exaggeration or disregard of the New Testament.

The heart of the Christian gospel is the reconciliation of God with the world, and the fulfillment of the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed will bring reconciliation to the whole creation. In that spirit, which is the necessary context for understanding the suffering and sacrifice of the Passion, we re-commit ourselves to working for the reconciliation of Christians and Jews. We call on our fellow Christians to join us. May this be a time of courage for us, when we are liberated from fear and timidity by God's assurance of life. May we be shaped in love of our neighbors by Jesus' example. May we share Christ's passion for peace, justice, and human dignity, a passion for which he died and was raised to new life.

The foregoing statement was prepared by Dr. Peter A. Pettit, Assistant Professor of Religion and Director of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding of Muhlenberg College (Allentown, Pennsylvania), and Dr. John C. Merkle, Professor of Theology at the College of St. Benedict (St. Joseph, Minnesota) and St. John's University (Collegeville, Minnesota) and Associate Director of the Jay Phillips Center for Jewish-Christian Learning. Released on September 8, 2004, it has been signed also by more than 120 other Christian scholars and leaders from the United States, Canada, Australia, Israel, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Poland, and Spain. For full list see

ijcu.org